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High and dry in cottage country

Water levels in lakes reaching record lows

Malcolm Kelly

National Post

Water levels in Lake Huron and Georgian Bay have dropped again this spring, leaving some cottage country boaters high and dry for the second straight season.

The receding shorelines are part of an overall drop in levels across all of the Great Lakes that have seen Huron fall another 10 centimetres from last year, bringing it to a total of 60 cm below normal levels and within 20 cm of the all-time record low in 1965.

Lake Superior is down 15 cm to its lowest level since 1926.

"Most of the Great Lakes are lower than last year," says Ralph Moulton, manager of the water level information office at Environment Canada.

That means boathouses and their marine railways are going to be even farther from the water's edge than last year, when some were up to 15 metres short of where they should have been.

Cottagers who built boathouses on sand or silt bottoms have the option of dragging their craft to the water and docking it at a marina. But those on rocky shores will have to rent a barge to move their craft, or abandon boating for a few years until the water levels rise.

Commercial marinas built in shallow water are also facing another tough year.

"We've gotten by in the last few years by dredging," says Kelly Hindson, co-owner of the 450-slip Hindson Marine, on Penetanguishene Bay. "We've spent probably \$250,000 in the last few years. It's something you have to do to stay in business."

One enormous Midland Bay marina spent \$1.5-million to drain its mooring and excavate to more than three metres.

Federal government grants have covered one-third of dredging costs, up to \$100,000, but no help was available from the provincial government.



Peter J. Thompson, National Post

Until water levels are restored, many boat owners will have to drag their craft to the lake, or hire a barge to move it, or give up boating.



"A lot of the cottages down the bay, their docks are sitting high and dry, and that's been good for marinas," says Mr. Hindson. "But the extra income we've gained hasn't offset the costs from the dredging process."

Even marina owners on deep water ports, who are less affected by the low lake levels, are worried American boaters will shy away from Central Ontario destinations, even though good boating is still available in Georgian Bay and Lake Huron.

The troubles in cottage country continue despite an increase in the amount of snow and rain this past fall and winter.

"Over the last year, we've seen above-average precipitation, but the water is just not making it into the Great Lakes," says Mr. Moulton. "It's being absorbed by the ground and by the inland lakes. "[They're] almost acting like a sponge in a way."

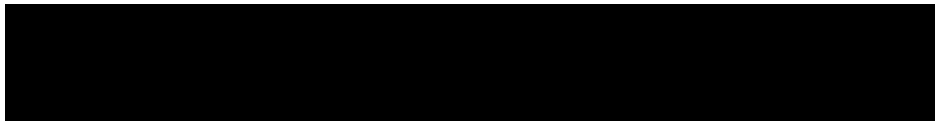
Over the past three years, above average temperatures have sucked the moisture out of surrounding land, which has to be replenished before water will run off into the major lakes.

There are some positive signs, however. With the increased recent precipitation helping to regenerate the ground, small inland lakes in Muskoka are returning to more normal levels. As that happens, runoff into the large bodies of water should increase over the next few years.

On the other hand, cottagers who draw their water from the large lakes (intakes normally sit in two metres of water but are currently in one metre) or shallow wells will again have to bring in bottled water for drinking.

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